

Subjective boundaries between fight and violence in the experience of professional MMA fighters

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Abstract

This study aimed to understand the experiences of professional mixed martial arts (MMA) fighters in the psychological transition between fight and violence, based on their own reports. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with an intentional sample of five participants and their analysis was carried out from a phenomenological perspective. The intentional crossing of experiences allowed the identification of five categories: maintaining focus vs. losing your head; maintenance of the technique vs. loss of the technique; feeling good vs. embarrassment; desire to test yourself vs. aggression; desirable retaliation vs. disproportionate retaliation. The results of this study indicate that the intensification of the combative exchange that leads to the transition from the first to the second item of each category is the key element in the subjective transition between fight and violence.

Keywords: Martial arts; combat sports; mixed martial arts; phenomenology; violence.

Fronteras subjetivas entre lucha y violencia desde la experiencia de luchadores profesionales de MMA

Resumen

El objetivo de este estudio es comprender las experiencias de los luchadores profesionales de artes marciales mixtas (MMA) en la transición psicológica entre la lucha y la violencia, a partir de sus propios informes. Se realizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas con una muestra intencional de cinco participantes y su análisis se realizó desde una perspectiva fenomenológica. El cruce intencional de experiencias permitió la identificación de cinco categorías: mantener la concentración vs. perder la concentración; mantenimiento de la técnica vs. pérdida de la técnica; sentirse bien vs. vergüenza; deseo de probarse a sí mismo vs. agresión; represalia deseable vs. represalia desproporcionada. Los resultados de este estudio indican que la intensificación del intercambio combativo que conduce a la transición del primero al segundo ítem de cada categoría es el elemento clave en la transición subjetiva entre lucha y violencia.

Palabras clave: Artes marciales; deportes de combate; artes marciales mixtas; fenomenología; violencia.

Fronteiras subjetivas entre luta e violência na experiência de lutadores profissionais de MMA

Resumo

O objetivo deste estudo é compreender as experiências de lutadores profissionais de artes marciais mistas (MMA) no trânsito psicológico entre a luta e a violência, a partir de seus próprios relatos. Entrevistas semiestructuradas foram conduzidas com uma amostra intencional de cinco participantes e sua análise foi realizada através de uma perspectiva fenomenológica. O cruzamento intencional das experiências permitiu a identificação de cinco categorias: manter o foco vs. perder a cabeça; manutenção da técnica vs. perda da técnica; sentir-se bem vs. constrangimento; desejo de se testar vs. agressão; revide desejável vs. revide desproporcional. Os resultados deste estudo indicam que a intensificação na troca combativa que conduz a passagem do primeiro ao segundo item de cada categoria é o elemento chave na transição subjetiva entre luta e violência.

Palavras-chave: Artes marciais; desportos de combate; artes marciais mistas; fenomenologia.

1. Introduction

Mixed martial arts (MMA) is a relatively recent sport that gained immense popularity in 1993 with the creation of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) in the USA (Awi, 2012). As

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reported by Awi, (2012), the origin of MMA has its roots in the *Vale Tudo* (Portuguese; total combat or no holds barred), which consisted of competitions very similar to a brawl, whether spectacularized or not, between practitioners of various martial arts and combat sports. The set of established regulations allows the classification of MMA as a combat sport in which the two opponents customarily utilize a variety of fighting techniques that include classic systems of martial arts, boxing and wrestling (Gauthier, 2009).

According to Jensen, Roman, Shaft and Wrisberg (2013), MMA fights are admittedly chaotic by the fighters themselves, requiring as a consequence a regulation of excitation in order to obtain the desired performance. Hence, the practice of MMA seems to exacerbate what in other types of fighting is typically more contained, that is, exposure to an intensity of exchange of blows that eventually makes it resemble a brawl. Indeed, Sánchez García and Malcolm (2010) argue that even when such similarity is not evident, it is commonplace for MMA to be socially assessed as a violent practice. In line with this argument, the natural idea of violence is justified by the intensity of the blows, which leads to similar modalities to be named as full contact combat sports. In this manner, one can prompt the relative question of how practitioners are exposed to a certain level of violence and, concomitantly, led to experience feelings of both humiliation and helplessness, on the one hand, and domination and destructive exaltation, on the other. However, the non-thematization of these experiences in studies that address combat sports and violence announces its conceptual problem.

Studies conducted by Matthews and Channon (2017), Channon and Matthews (2018) and Channon (2020), investigated violence in martial arts and combat sports. Although these investigations do not start from a theoretical basis that says what violence is, they allow a differentiation of judgment, consideration, concept and notion of violence that the fighters themselves have, in addition to their experiences, an elaboration of violence that enables to recognize the boundary between fight and violence. Similarly, in view of the conceptual insufficiency of the literature on violence and sport, which often falls on naturalistic (as in Sánchez García & Malcolm, 2010) or nominalist (as in Guilbert, 2004) uses, the phenomenological analysis undertaken by Barreira (2010, 2017a, 2017b, 2019) and Barreira and Telles (2019) has offered a new conceptual perspective. As stated by that perspective, the difference between fight and violence cannot be reduced exclusively to facts neither exclusively to representations, but must be reconducted to the lived experiences and lies in the moment when it passes to the unacceptable (Barreira 2017a).

The phenomenological understanding of violence in combat sports is recognized through the limits in which there is a rupture of the sensitive norm in the fighter's experience (Barreira, 2017a). Barreira (2017a) points out that it is the perceived rupture of parameters of acceptable aggressiveness that is evaluated as effectuation of the violence phenomenon. The author also claims that violence does not happen only by aggressive intensification, but at the moment when, whatever the aggressiveness parameter used, there is the fading of the other in an action that aggressively objectifies the individual (Barreira, 2017a). According to (Barreira, 2017b), this objectification may occur in acts that no necessarily involve hostile intent, but in any act that involves an "intensity that is objectively understood as inappropriate for a fight" (p. 367).

According to Barreira (2019), professional MMA fighters report that there is no violence in combat when the fighters are adequately prepared, with refined technique and self-control. Similarly, starting from another epistemological matrix, symbolic interactionism, Channon and Matthews (2018) argue that there is a mutual consent among combat sports practitioners that this practice is not violent as long as it does not violate the person's dignity. For Barreira (2017a), who also considers the degradation of dignity as a decisive criterion for violence, the conceptual distinction between fight and violence is an intellectual and ethical requirement posed by the fact that

the voluntary deliberation of the fighters to put themselves in a dispute in which being struck and striking constitutes the nature of the fight. Deliberation can be interrupted by the athlete himself during the fight or by the referee when he understands that the athlete is no longer able to defend himself or even signal his withdrawal. If this reduction requirement is ignored, one ignores what is to be a victim of violence, something that escapes the subject's will and



acceptance, his right and his freedom. It also ignores what it means to be the subject of violent action, something that depends on an intention directed not at the body that one intends to dominate, but at to the other person who, when attacked, is annulled as such, that is, annulled as a person. (p. 283-284).

This mutuality is reinforced by the study of Abramson and Modzelewski (2011) due to the fact that MMA fighters establish a voluntary community where they share values and characteristics incorporated into their lifestyle. On the other hand, the absence of these factors, as well as the disregard for the rules and failures of arbitration, are configured as situations that may be constituted by the violation of the person (Matthews & Channon, 2017), bringing out violence in the cage¹ (Barreira, 2019). Hence, as claimed by Telles and Barreira (2019), the mastery of technique is not only configured as an attitude that enables the body to fight, but also as a possible impediment to an eventual transition between fight and violence. Nonetheless, as stated by Barreira (2017a), there is no guarantee for non-violence because “every fight has its own dynamic tension, which is constituted by the fighters’ reciprocity and, occasionally, the violent loose of reciprocity” (p. 366). The fact that combat sports should be classified as non-violent (Channon & Matthews, 2018; Matthews & Channon, 2017; Channon, 2020; Barreira, 2010, 2017a, 2017b, 2019; Barreira & Telles, 2019) does not exempt practitioners from experiencing violence or from slipping into destructive behaviours. This is the matter in question in this paper.

The experience of transition from fight to violence occurs in a pre-reflexive dimension, in which the violation of what is mutually consented among the fighters during the combat can emerge without one realizing it, due to lack of control at a pre-reflexive level (Basseti, Telles & Barreira 2016; Coelho & Barreira, 2020; Melo & Barreira, 2015). Souza et al. (2017) state that, from a biological point of view, the increase in intensity in a fight leads to a rise in testosterone levels, a hormone whose elevation is associated with aggressive behaviour and which is found in high concentrations in MMA fighters after the combat, both in winners and in losers. As believed by Coelho and Barreira (2020), this makes the intensified combat practices desired in the routine of teaching and training combat sports, as it may assist in preparing the fighter for a more intense confrontation and, therefore, less likely to approach the objectification process of the other.

The actions and feelings related to the exposure to violence, that is, the subjectivity and objectivity of the experience, as well as the combative culture formed communally around these actions, call into question the very meaning of the fight and the martial art, as outlined by these phenomena performed by Barreira (2017b). In that manner, the so-called virtues associated with martial arts and combat sports, such as confidence, self-esteem, self-control, sportsmanship in the case of the fighting spirit, operationalized in diverse contexts of psychosocial interventions (Hébert, 2000), are subjected to moral paradoxes that request to be faced comprehensively as elucidated by Barreira (2013).

As Barreira (2010) affirms, “the fighter’s ethical challenge is to sustain the fighting spirit when tended to drag on by the predominance of hostility to the fight or hostility to the duel” (p. 4). In the same direction, Barreira (2017b) posits, “the fighting spirit contains an ethical essence that can counter violence and is ultimately opposed to its promotion” (p. 373). Nonetheless, how is this challenge understood according to the very experience of these fighters who fight in a modality in which the lines between hostility and competitiveness, violence and fight, aggression and determination, are presented in an opaque way and, in certain situations, even in an undifferentiated way? When the fighter is tensioned to an increase in intensity, to unfair blows, is it possible to sustain the fighting spirit? Barreira (2017a) names the space between sporting boundaries and their rupture as an *ambiguous zone* “in which the possibilities of sporting excellence and violent events take shape reaching the point of being consummated” (p. 284). These moral paradoxes involve the fighter in every aspect, not only physical but also psychological. Therefore, this study aimed to identify and understand through the reports of professional MMA fighters their experiences in the psychological transition between fight and violence.

¹ According to van Bottenburg and Heilbron (2006), MMA competitions traditionally take place in an area similar to a boxing ring. Frequently, it refers to this combat space as “cage” or “octagon” due to its shape with a robust plastic-coated fence.



2. Materials and methods

The classic phenomenology of Husserl (Behnke, 1996) and of authors in tune with the phenomenology proposed by this philosopher was adopted in the present study. In agreement with Martínková and Parry (2011) and Nesti (2011), as a research method, phenomenology seeks to identify structures of consciousness that attempt to account for how something is experienced by someone by focusing on the meaning by investigating the essence of human experience. Halák, Jirásek, and Nesti (2014) remember that, through phenomenology, the phenomenon shows itself as it is through the investigation of experiences “as they are presented to the subjects who are experiencing them” (Standal, 2014, p. 37). In this particular case, it asks about the nature of what is experienced by professional MMA athletes and by explaining the ways in which the phenomena that characterize the subjective border between fight and violence for these fighters may appear to us.

Although Merleau-Ponty and authors aligned with his work are the most frequent in the literature dealing with the bodily domain, which includes martial arts, it is critical to emphasize that the formation of Merleau-Ponty's thought and conception of corporeality is based especially on Husserl Ideas II (a manuscript launched post mortem). However, there is a methodological difference between the authors, because while Husserl's approach is phenomenological, Merleau-Ponty's comprises a mix between phenomenology and French existentialism. A critical difference in these perspectives relies on the phenomenological reduction. Husserl starts from the situational context of a phenomenon (natural orientation) and, along the reductions (phenomenological orientation), reaches essential elements without which this phenomenon, in whatever context situation, would not emerge. On the other hand, the reduction based on Merleau-Ponty is tied to the situational context, and descriptions of its pre-reflexive moments (Merleau-Ponty, 1996), without demanding the same commitment to unveiling structural lived experiences of the triggered phenomena. For this reason, based on the method proposed by Husserl, what interested us in the present investigation was not how the fights were (as in Telles, Vaitinen & Barreira, 2019), but the residue, what was subtracted from fighters' reports as the lived experiences leading to violence transitions.

The subjective experiences of professional MMA fighters were accessed through phenomenological interviews (Barreira & Ranieri, 2013; Giorgi & Sousa, 2010) as well as the suspensive listening and intentional crossing described by Barreira and Ranieri (2013) and Barreira (2017c), as a result of the understanding of the individual from the sensitive listening development (Amatuzzi, 2001). We start from the situational context that throughout the reductions, through suspensive listening and intentional crossing, arrive at essential elements without which the subjective boundary between fight and violence would not emerge. The result of this reduction can then become an interpretive lens that makes it possible to recognize, in each situation, the presence or absence of lived experiences that are decisive for violence transitions.

According to Giorgi and Sousa (2010), a critical characteristic of the method is the *epoché*, in which it is intended to suspend the belief of the natural attitude, by subtracting from the intentional scene the use of our previous knowledge when we phenomenologically analyse a given phenomenon, whether they are scientific, cultural or common sense. Even though the authors possess previous experiences with martial arts and combat sports, all prejudices that can be returned to concepts, such as the concept of violence, are put on hold through suspensive listening (Barreira, 2017c). The commitment to an experience we want to learn from the beginning is sought, and the interview questions go in that direction. Throughout the interview, what is emerging in the responses is explored, explaining what was experienced by the fighters interviewed.

All the interview processes are characterized by going deeper with the experience of the people, that is, they aim to favour the interviewee to verify the lived experiences. With the set of interviews in hand, i.e., recorded and transcribed, the phenomenological analysis or reduction proceeds, where it focuses exclusively on the relationship between the object of the experience and the experience of that same object and, finally, on the intentional crossing, which enables the emergence of the constant and universal element among all experiences (Barreira & Ranieri, 2013; Barreira, 2017c).



The intentional sample consisted of five male professional MMA fighters from various cities in the state of São Paulo, Brazil. The age of the participants varied between 23 and 34 years, and the time of experience practicing MMA between 8 and 16 years. These fighters should have had at least one professional fight in the sport, an inclusion criterion that supports psychological characterization to assume the identity of being a fighter. This is a social resource in the context of MMA, legitimized by Spencer (2009) when pointing out the difference between MMA practitioners and fighters. We interviewed professionals as a way to follow what confers on the status of a fighter in the social context of MMA fighters. Although we have chosen this criterion for the inclusion and exclusion of fighters, this does not mean that these experiences cannot be lived before having acquired the professional character. On the contrary, it is very likely that without going through this process the fighter will not become professional, therefore, it is a process that also participates in the experiences of non-professional athletes. The contacts took place from an intentional process, in which the link with the interviewees was sought from teams and groups that carried out training in structured gyms for combat sports.

The study was approved by the local Research Ethics Committee, and the interviews were conducted after signing the Free and Informed Consent Form. The number of interviews was limited based on saturation, that is, when there is a repetition not only of topics and content among the interviewees, but also of the meaning of their reports. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for later phenomenological reduction and intentional crossing in order to explain the meaning of what is experienced by practitioners at the time of combat. Although the interviews were all recorded on audio with the consent of the participants and manually transcribed in full, only the excerpts to be used in this study were translated into English. The back translation procedure described by Mandal (2018) was adopted by two bilingual researchers so that the original native meanings were transmitted, guaranteeing transparency and reliability.

The identities of the interviewees were replaced by pseudonyms, to avoid identification. The script prepared for the semi-structured interview, aiming to direct each interviewee to get in touch and express their own experiences, consisted of the following questions: 1) How is the experience of fighting when you are practicing MMA? 2) Have you ever been in a situation where you or your opponent got out of control? 3) Have you ever experienced a situation in MMA combat where motivation was a matter of honour between you and your opponent (i.e., victory or defeat was not just a sporting issue, but something between you and your opponent)?

Question 1 seeks to lead the interviewee to the experience of fighting MMA. Question 2 seeks to lead the interviewee to an experience where there is a possibility to exist, even without a clear assessment of the interviewee, elements that characterize the violence, such as the loss of the ability to maintain and sustain the fighting spirit. Finally, question number 3 investigates possible motivations that made this fighter, in his experience in MMA, abandon the fighting spirit, with the transition to violence.

3. Results

The intentional crossing of the interviewees' experiences allowed the identification of five categories based on the studied phenomenon: *maintaining focus vs. losing your head*; *maintenance of the technique vs. loss of the technique*; *feeling good vs. embarrassment*; *desire to test yourself vs. aggression*; *desirable retaliation vs. disproportionate retaliation*. The categories correspond to the diverse manifestations of the elements in which both an attitude of fight and an attitude of violence predominate. Within each category, the border between fight and violence that the study proposes was identified from the description of the typical structure of the subjective experiences of fighting of MMA athletes by delineating essential features of their living experiences.

3.1. *Maintaining focus vs. losing your head*

The subjective fighting experience of the professional MMA fighters interviewed is permeated by maintaining focus. This proves to be indispensable for maintaining a fighting attitude, whether in training or competitions, which appears as a defining experience that guides their goals: *"I try to never lose focus and base myself on another subject. I can always keep my head*



focused in the goal" (Pseudo-Randy)². The goal in training refers to what must be accomplished from a technical and psychological point of view to destabilize the opponent, showing that among MMA fighters the goal comprises a unit of meaning proper to the fight that implies great discipline to perform the appropriate action.

On the other hand, when crossing the border between fight and violence, it is common for fighters to feel tensioned to experience fighting in an uncontrolled way, a very close attitude to violence. When the experience of "losing your mind" is reported, it can be acknowledged that the subjective sense of fighting for this fighter is significantly close or is already part of a brawl. In this way, the goal set for the fight is abandoned and the fighter only fights blindly, as it can be seen in the reports: *"And I think that was it, we forgot the goal there in the training, and we went to finish each other"* (Pseudo-Fedor)³; *"I lost control within the rules, like being more aggressive. But I don't want to kill someone"* (Pseudo-Chuck)⁴. The fighters report that losing their cool is an experience for those who fight MMA that not only happens in a physical aspect, but also psychological: *"Every time we lose our heads, we were actually fighting for our honour"* (Pseudo-Fedor)⁵.

This feeling is shown as a facilitating element for the fighter to abandon the fight and move over the subjective border between fight and violence. The reports demonstrate how the experience is triggered in a physical aspect: *"Yes, I already lost my mind. Sometimes when sparring with my older students. You receive some blows and retaliate. You get that desire to discount"* (Pseudo-Chuck)⁶. In addition, this experience can be triggered through the retaliation to provocations, as observed in Pseudo-Kimbo's⁷ speech: *"They go about unravelling with words, with attitudes until you lose your cool."* Although retaliation is a common aspect, its manifestation can occur from of a physical origin (increased intensity of the blows) or psychological (when the fighters are offended). Without any distinction between them in the experience perceived, this experience emerges simply as growing tension, that is, they feel extremely challenged, being compelled to respond to the challenge.

3.2. Maintenance of the technique vs. loss of the technique

The maintenance of the technique is pointed out by the fighters as a limiting element in the subjective border between fight and violence. This implies the control of bodily action, which aims not only at the aesthetic aspect of the fight, but also in respecting the opponent within the rules. The fighters describe the maintenance of the technique as a physical and psychological aspect of staying in the area of predominance proper to the fight: *"I try to keep myself psychologically controlled and always keep the technique"* (Pseudo-Randy)⁸. However, the loss of the technique represents a decline in the fight that goes beyond the subjective frontier of the fight, and therefore, violence is predominant in itself: *"Yes, there have been times when you lose your mind, get out of control, and forget all the technique"* (Pseudo-Fedor)⁹.

The reports demonstrate that it is common for the inexperienced fighter, still without total mastery of the technique, not to *"be used to taking the blow, feel it and lose control"* (Pseudo-Randy)¹⁰. Beginning practitioners are pointed out in the descriptions of professional fighters as

² "Nunca procuro perder o foco e me basear em outro assunto. Sempre consigo manter a cabeça focada no objetivo" (Pseudo Randy).

³ "E acho que foi isso, a gente esqueceu o objetivo ali do treino e fomos para acabar um com o outro" (Pseudo Fedor).

⁴ "Perdi o controle dentro das regras, tipo sendo mais agressivo. Mas não de querer matar alguém" (Pseudo Chuck).

⁵ "Toda vez que a gente perde a cabeça, a gente estava na verdade lutando pela nossa honra" (Pseudo Fedor).

⁶ "Já perdi a cabeça sim. Às vezes fazendo sparring com meus alunos mais velhos. Você toma uns dois ali e revida e você fica com aquela vontade de descontar" (Pseudo Chuck).

⁷ "Vão desafiando com palavras, com atitudes até você perder a calma" (Pseudo Kimbo).

⁸ "Tento me manter controlado psicologicamente e sempre manter a técnica" (Pseudo Randy).

⁹ "Já aconteceram momentos de perder a cabeça sim, sair na porrada mesmo, esquecer toda a técnica" (Pseudo Fedor).

¹⁰ "Esteja acostumado a levar o golpe, sentir e querer descontrolar" (Pseudo Randy).



presenting limited technique as well as a tendency to advance the existing line on the subjective border between fight and violence. This is evidenced in Pseudo-Randy's account:

In this case, they were beginning students who did not know how to control and started to take a shot at me. But I always knew how to take the situation. I managed the situation. I have a well-trained mind against it.¹¹

On the other hand, Pseudo-Kimbo's account shows that experienced fighters, with more significant graduation or fighting time, are also likely to show a decline in technique. This can be perceived as a disrespectful attitude and encourage the predominance of violence:

The person thinks that just because he has a technical or knowledge level higher than yours, that he has more history in the fight, that he doesn't have to respect you, and that he can treat you in a way far below the way you deserve in training. It ends up becoming a real fight, personal.¹²

3.3. *Feeling good vs. embarrassment*

This category highlights an aspect of the relationship between the predominant feelings among the fighters, signalling the values that constitute the practice and those that, in the lived experience, depreciate it. "Feeling good" relates to the lifestyle, as illustrated by Pseudo-Randy: "*I am happy in fighting, and in what I do.*"¹³ Fighting takes on a meaningful place in the personal identity as a representation of everything that the person does: "*I feel I am that*" (Pseudo-Kimbo)¹⁴. On the other hand, this takes on a negative form when moving through the area of predominance of violence.

When considering the fight as a value to their identity, when something offends the fight in their experience, it is commonplace for fighters to take it personally. In such cases, it is not a dispute related to the fight, but a problem between people. When participating in strenuous training in which several training companions took turns to strike him, without interruption, and forced him to return, even after being knocked out more than once, Pseudo-Mirko reports: "*I thought that was embarrassing and humiliating. I preferred leaving.*"¹⁵ The experience of fighting can be lived in a positive way, while the slide into violence is necessarily accompanied by some degree of embarrassment, as can be seen in Pseudo-Mirko's experience:

The people who trained me at the time made me train at an inhuman level that no one can accept and submit to, cutting myself and keeping the fight with a lot of blood. I thought it was embarrassing. I thought it was humiliating. I thought these people didn't put so much faith in me.¹⁶

3.4. *Desire to test yourself vs. aggression*

The desire to test themselves is shown to represent a common element in the experiences of professional MMA fighters. The desire to test oneself is described as a fundamental element for the establishment of fighting habits that, in a positive way, focus on the predominance of the fight: "*You get beaten more in training than in an official event. You are already calloused in training*" (Pseudo-

¹¹"No caso, foram alunos iniciantes que não souberam controlar e partiram para cima. Mas eu sempre soube levar a situação, controlei a situação, tenho um psicológico bem treinado contra a isso" (Pseudo Randy).

¹²"A pessoa acha que só porque tem um nível técnico ou de conhecimento superior ao seu, que tem mais história na luta, que não tem que respeitar você, e que pode tratar você de uma forma muito abaixo da forma que você merece em um treinamento. Acaba virando uma luta de verdade, pessoal" (Pseudo Kimbo).

¹³"Sou feliz lutando, e no que faço" (Pseudo Randy).

¹⁴"Sinto que sou aquilo" (Pseudo Kimbo).

¹⁵"Achei que aquilo foi constrangedor e humilhante. Preferi ir embora" (Pseudo Mirko).

¹⁶"As pessoas que me treinavam na época me fizeram treinar em um nível desumano e que ninguém pode aceitar e se submeter, me cortando e continuando a luta com muito sangue. Achei que foi constrangedor. Achei que foi humilhante. Achei que essas pessoas não botavam tanta fé em mim" (Pseudo Mirko).



Kimbo)¹⁷. However, testing oneself with the other in the fight means to put to the test what is known and, therefore, one may approach one's own limits. This is the reason why, when testing themselves, fighters are likely to experience the psychological experience of violence, that is, of exceeding their limits as fighters. Exceeding this limit may involve a violation through the lack of mutuality and consent between fighters. It is a relatively deliberate project, as can be seen in Pseudo-Fedor's account:

It is good for the psychological aspect that you know you have to improve it and it is also good for the physical aspect because you end up breaking apart and discovering that you can go a little beyond what you were expecting. I pushed myself and did something else that I didn't expect to do. But I also think it is a valid thing, I think you start to test your psychological part a little bit more, as at the time of the real fight, you cannot abandon what you trained.¹⁸

Going beyond the limits of what would, in fact, be the subjective border, a frontier that does not exclude the physical record, since the corporal limit is given to the fighter's perception of his condition of enduring exhaustion or pain, is placed as an exercise in which one seeks to expand the margins of the border, to enlarge the personal boundaries in which one is able to sustain the fight without the fall in violence. When acquiring combat experience, it is possible for the fighter to improve his fighting habit. This is explicit in Pseudo-Fedor's account: *"Finishing each other, like one was trying to knock out the other, one wanted the other to be on the ground, and then we would be happy."*¹⁹ Therefore, the desire of these fighters to test themselves, to move on the edge of violence by increasing the intensity of the fighting, can promote a positive aspect to the fighters' experience. Put differently, the fighters are tensioned, possibly deliberately, to move through the area of predominance proper to violence. However, the challenge of testing yourself, of proving yourself, is the challenge of maintaining the fighting spirit. In other words, the challenge can fail.

The approach to the frontier of violence can also lead to an aggression relationship. While one part of the combative relationship intends to test itself, the other may aim to hurt, even though it retains its self-control, as expressed in Pseudo-Kimbo's account: *"I realized my opponent had no intention of having a sporting dispute with me. He really wanted to hurt me."*²⁰ This report, already in the predominance of violence, reveals an experience that wants to get out of the fight because it only wants to injure the other, with the abandonment of the sporting sense of the fight. The desire to test and eventually overcome the limits proper to the fight, and they can also go beyond the limits of the subjective frontier, starting with a significant violation for the transition to violence through aggression.

3.5. Desirable retaliation vs. disproportionate retaliation

This category deals with the fighters' descriptions of the trigger point between fight and violence, that is, the fine line that makes a difference between the fight and the violence. It is exactly the subjective border of the fighters in their experiences while fighting. The combat relation is given to the other and this relation possesses a retaliation trigger point, because while the retaliation is desirable, it transits in the area with predominance of the fight: *"The retaliation, it is automatic"* (Pseudo-Kimbo)²¹.

¹⁷ "Você apanha mais no treino do que na luta. Você já está calejado do treinamento" (Pseudo Kimbo).

¹⁸ "É bom pelo aspecto psicológico que você sabe que tem que melhorar isso e também é bom pelo aspecto físico, porque você acaba se quebrando inteiro e descobre que pode ir um pouco além do que você mesmo estava esperando. Foi e fez outra coisa que talvez não fosse para fazer. Mas também acho que é algo válido, acho que você começa a testar um pouco mais também a sua parte psicológica, de você na hora da luta de verdade, você não poder sair do que você treinou" (Pseudo Fedor).

¹⁹ "Acabar um com o outro, tipo um estava tentando nocautear o outro mesmo, um queria que o outro estivesse no chão e aí sim a gente estaria feliz" (Pseudo Fedor).

²⁰ "Eu percebi que meu adversário não tinha a menor intenção de ter uma disputa esportiva comigo. Ele queria realmente me machucar" (Pseudo Kimbo).

²¹ "O revide, ele é automático" (Pseudo Kimbo).



The experience of retaliation is necessary to expand the limits of the fight border, influencing the fighting habits so that the fighter supports more intense training. The retaliation is described as a natural attitude that occurs at the same intensity as the blow: *"The couch has always told us to punch in the same intensity that the other punches us"* (Pseudo-Fedor)²². However, when strained to a disproportionate retaliation, that is, when the fighter is hit and does not feel capable of fighting back at the level of his opponent, or when the opponent's blow is delivered with greater intensity in relation to the other punches of the combat, disproportionate retaliation may occur, as it can be seen in Pseudo-Fedor's account:

In training you think: "the guy hit me harder, so I have to hit harder or he will leave thinking he is better than me." In training, the guy hits me hard, and I want to prove I hit even harder. It's like that. I feel like I have to hit harder.²³

With the increase of this intensity, the retaliation can trigger, on the one hand, several elements presented in other categories: the loss of the technique, the aggression, the embarrassment, the loss of the goal. On the other hand, it can trigger the desire to test yourself, the experience of feeling good, the success of the goal, the maintenance of focus. As the combat involves an exchange of blows, the fighter experiences a relationship where fighting back at the opponent's level appears as a necessary experience to carry out the challenge of the fight: *"You take a blow there and fight back, you get the desire to discount"* (Pseudo-Mirko)²⁴.

When the fighter is incapable to carry out the fighting spirit, he experiences aspects of violence. However, when the backlash is recognized to be disproportionate, it is common for the increase in intensity to be triggered: *"One started hitting harder, the other started hitting even harder, and then we realized we were hitting as if tomorrow would never come"* (Pseudo-Fedor)²⁵. With this increase in intensity, some elements of the predominance of violence are demonstrated, such as the loss of the goal, the loss of focus, and in some cases the loss of technique, which may lead the fighter to experience feelings of embarrassment.

The retaliation may lead the fighter to extend the boundaries of the fight frontier when understood proportionately and to develop fighting habits, more intense training, ability to withstand blows, becoming beneficial to the professional MMA fighter. Nonetheless, when this retaliation is disproportionately experienced, it is likely for fighters to inadvertently abandon the existing limit in the fight and cross the subjective boundary between fight and violence. Assuredly, this experience can be negative for the sport of MMA, as the fighters could, besides being injured, experience feelings of humiliation - *"I thought it was humiliating"* (Pseudo-Kimbo)²⁶ - and, eventually, abandon the practice.

4. Discussion

Through the employment of phenomenological interviews and subsequent use of the procedures for crossing and analysing the collected data, it was possible to understand and identify the subjective frontier between fight and violence in the experience of professional MMA fighters. The maintenance of the fighting spirit, described by Barreira (2010, 2013), can be identified in the elected categories as the area of the predominance of the fight and its essential aspects. On the other hand, the decline or abandonment of the fighting spirit, means advancing over the existing subjective frontier, crossing the fight barrier and, consequently, reaching an area specific to

²² "O professor falava sempre para a gente bater sempre na intensidade que o outro batia na gente" (Pseudo Fedor).

²³ "Nos treinos você pensa: 'o cara me bateu mais forte, então eu tenho que bater mais forte ainda ou ele vai sair daqui achando que é melhor que eu'. No treino o cara me bate forte, eu quero provar que eu bato mais forte ainda. É tipo assim. Eu sinto que tenho que bater mais forte ainda" (Pseudo Fedor).

²⁴ "Você toma uns dois ali e revida, você fica com aquela vontade de descontar" (Pseudo Mirko).

²⁵ "Aí um começou a bater mais forte, o outro começou a bater mais forte ainda, e aí quando foi ver a gente estava batendo como se não houvesse mais amanhã" (Pseudo Fedor).

²⁶ "Achei que foi humilhante" (Pseudo Kimbo).



violence. This subjective frontier occurs in the psychological experience of MMA fighters, in their combat experience.

These experiences, many times, transit not only in the area of the fight, but cross a subjective frontier where violence is predominant. In his research, Guilbert (2004) argues that violence "is the product of representations" (p. 54). In our case, we assume that it is determinant to excavate the lived experience — not the representative content — of the interviewees. Barreira (2019) clearly demonstrates this difference in which the ambiguity of the expression violence is both assumed and denied by MMA fighters, which, ultimately, depends on the perspective in the third or first person. In that manner, the fight of MMA, when seen, in third person, is frequently classified as violent. On the other hand, when carried out in first person, it is classified as non-violent. The phenomenological reduction allows us to notice that the spectator of the fight emphasizes, in critical situations, the sensitive dimension of corporeality, the subject body that suffers. As for the protagonist, it is the operative body, so the action of those who attack and defend themselves is evident: with their motivation determined by the challenge, not by hostility or by a question of honour strange to the sporting challenge itself, there is no violence where there is mutual deliberation between the fighters to proceed.

As pointed out by Barreira (2019), moments in which the fading of the other occurs represent actions that aggressively objectify the transition to violence during the practice of MMA. When being blurred as a person, as an athlete, this person is no longer someone in a sporting dispute, but someone in a violent conflict, someone subject to a process of objectification. On the other hand, when the fighter recognizes this loss and stops fighting or initiates an action that seeks to establish a limit, it is likely to interrupt what could emerge in a crescendo that is likely to culminate in violence, before actually moving on to what would be unacceptable in combat (Barreira, 2019). Beginner fighters, as mentioned by the interviewees, may be an example of MMA practitioners who may not recognize their limit has been crossed and, suddenly, be assaulted by anger and turn to violence. In an ideal behaviour, the fighter realizes and undertakes an action to prevent crossing the limit and reaching the violence.

At the beginning of their MMA journey, it is prevalent for fighters to report a lack of control over technical aspects as well as the lack of experiences on the intensity of the strikes. As argued by Channon (2020), the force applied in the blows, when it exceeds what is allowed among those involved, constitutes a significant violation for the transition to violence. With the acquisition of technique and control of this intensity, they report that it is part of their experience to test themselves. As a result, the training is sometimes more intense with the intention of developing a fighting habit. On the other hand, they are required to withstand the fighting spirit, even when they are strained to combat of greater intensity.

The experience described by the interviewees as "maintaining focus" shows itself proper to the fight, as a relevant element for sustaining the fighting spirit. Stenius and Dziwenka (2015) argue that maintaining the focus on the external object, related to following the goal established for the fight, is essential to be able to bear the injuries resulting from the combat and the potential danger of violence in MMA. Following the goal represents a key facet to the fight, composing, with the focus, a structure to sustain the challenge of the fighting spirit. Consequently, the experience of losing one's head described by the interviewees leads to the collapse of the fighting spirit, with the transit through the area where the violence predominates, giving rise to an aggressive predominance, that is, deliberate violence that no longer meets the delimitation of the sense of the fight.

The category "maintenance of the technique" determines an aesthetic issue to the transit between fight and violence. The fight frequently includes technical aspects for those who appreciate these types of combat perceived as aesthetically beautiful, or even artistic and very plastic movements that value the spectacle (Sánchez García & Malcolm, 2010). The maintenance of the technique is essential to the fight. Nevertheless, the loss of the technique can occur, for various reasons, such as exhaustion or even due to the lack of developed technical resources by the fighter. In addition, according to Sánchez García and Malcolm (2010), the combat techniques allowed in

MMA minimize physical damage and suggest that fighters have significant self-regulation that does not increase the overall level of “violence”²⁷.

On the other hand, the reported experience of “loss of technique” can make the fight similar to a brawl, and the brawl is usually perceived as ugly. When the technique is abandoned in the name of increasing the intensity due to an objectification of the other, it is possible to affirm that this phenomenon is understood to be characteristic of the predominance of violence, where the fighting spirit is renounced, as well as its ethical support. As Barreira (2010) states, in the face of an attack of an intensity that violates what is acceptable among fighters, which annuls the other as a person, there is no mutual recognition between individuals. Therefore, the existential condition for the fight is lost. In addition, the absence of a refined technique, especially in the case of inexperienced fighters, according to the interviewees' experiences, can be configured as a situation in which the fighting spirit is not sustained. In this sense, as believed by Barreira (2017b), the acquisition of skills through training contributes to the containment of hostility in corporal fight.

The element of “feeling good” is central to the identity of the fighters and the value of the experience of fighting. The fight shows how to feel good. However, the feeling proper to the violence, reported by the fighters in their experiences of fighting, is the constraint. The embarrassment corresponds to situations in which excesses occur, such as when the fighter, even without being able to fight, is required to continue, exposing himself to a critical vulnerability. This element is illustrated in the experiences of professional MMA fighters in the study by Barreira (2019) when they report that the application of blows in conditions of vulnerability is related to a context of disrespect to the rules and emotional lack of control associated with violence. Consequently, the limit of the sensitive norm that establishes the subjective limit of violence in combat is exceeded (Barreira, 2017a).

The desire to “test yourself” can be understood and identified as a category specific to the fight. Professional MMA fighters in their combat experience reported that the desire to test themselves is necessary for living in MMA. Jensen et al. (2013) argue that although they recognize the importance of testing themselves in training, professional fighters have their experience centred almost entirely on competitions, where they will really put skills to the test. In addition, Sánchez García and Malcolm (2010) state that the more experienced the fighter becomes, the greater will be his effort to improve and prove his skills. However, the interviewees report that when the combat experience involves advanced fighters and beginners, or just beginning fighters, it is frequent that because they are not used to receiving more intense blows, as well as controlling their own blows, it is possible that they experience feelings of embarrassment and aggression. Therefore, the desire to test oneself is necessary to expand the limit of the subjective frontier in the fighting experience of MMA fighters, which may create a fighting habit within what is accepted among fighters as acceptable and not experienced as violence by them.

The *habitus* is described by Sánchez García and Malcolm (2010) as something that is shaped by the interaction between individuals in social circumstances liable to vary. Hence, its configuration is dynamic, but not totally malleable and fluctuating at the whim of each one, because the routines nonetheless have great weight in their consolidation and maintenance. In other words, the desire to test oneself implies interaction with the other. Once this interaction is compromised, the meaning shown to the other is that of aggression, more appropriate to the brawl. The understanding of this phenomenon by the other may be characteristic of violence. According to Barreira (2017a), violent aggression can be understood as any attitude that intends to injure or offend the other that is motivated to avoid such treatment. In the experience of violent aggression, the action taken corresponds to an objectification of the other, making use of disproportionate or irregular force in the fight, increasing hostility, constituting a brawl and as a motivation to fight blindly to the other (Barreira, 2017a). Although these fighters are strained in combat to the maximum, this is not uncommon, as it is part of what will become an acquired habit.

Finally, the category “desirable retaliation vs. disproportionate retaliation” indicates that the phenomenon retaliation can be understood and identified as the subjective border between

²⁷ Our quotation marks, since we do not understand violence as the authors do.



fight and violence. The retaliation is the modulator of the combat intensity and serves as a trigger for the fighter to abandon the fighting spirit or the maintenance of the fighting spirit, when it is disproportionate. In this case, according to Channon (2020), MMA is likely to become violent because the interactions between the fighters run away from what is explicitly allowed. This phenomenon is also identified as central to the transition between fighting and violence in Capoeira (Melo & Barreira, 2015), Jiu jitsu (Basetti, Telles & Barreira, 2016) and Greco-Roman fighting (Coelho & Barreira, 2020), since the increase in the intensity of the blows is not mutual, that is, it is only carried out by one of the parties. In this way, the fighter is led to experience a phenomenon specific to violence due to the occurrence of unacceptable actions that violate what is mutually consented between MMA fighters. However, when fighting back is desirable and there is mutuality in the relationship with the other, it is possible to identify elements specific to the fight, such as the desire to test yourself, and to feel good. Consequently, an expansion of this subjective frontier is generated by the creation of a fighting habit and an increase in tolerance to the intensity of the blows, concomitantly maintaining the fighting spirit.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, among professional MMA fighters, the modulation of intensity in combative exchange is the key element in the subjective transition between fight and violence. Broadly speaking, when the combative intensification corresponds to the transition from the first to the second item in each category, it tends to become a trigger for violence. The combination of distinctive modes and the dosages of the experiences explained define the psychological dynamics of the transition to violence. In line with the concept of sensitive norms (Barreira, 2017a; Barreira & Telles, 2019), learning the norms must be understood as a cultural embodiment that leads to a sensitive experience compatible with that required by the modality. Usually, those who have not appropriated these norms see violence even among those who have embodied them, since they would not accept being hit like an MMA athlete (Barreira, 2019). An empathic appropriation of them, that is, not in the third person, from the point of view of the sensitive body, but in the first person, from the point of view of the operating body, as is the case of the majority of spectators not practicing MMA who appreciate it, allows MMA to be perceived as a sport, not as violence.

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